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ABSTRACT

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# Implications of Sport Retirement Research for The Practitioner

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Abstract

This paper cites findings from a research study on 1,100 former intercollegiate athletes (427 males and 696 females) to demonstrate the relevance of sport retirement research to coaches and other practitioners. The data are used to challenge typical assumptions about the process of leaving sport (i.e., sport retirement is a termination of involvement and sport retirement requires considerable psychological adjustment to role withdrawal) by suggesting alternative perspectives from which both researchers and practitioners can view sport retirement. Notions of lifelong development, reprioritization of interests, and role transitions are used as a basis from which counselling and/or other interventions can be based. Considerable attention is devoted to the concept of sport role commitment and the development of social and vocational skill alternatives. Implications of the findings for the coach/practitioner are discussed.

Implications of Sport Retirement Research

for The Practitioner

For many years now the role of the sport sociologist has been primarily that of researcher. This philosophical stance has in many instances strained the relationship between the subdiscipline and physical education, particularly with respect to the relationship between research and application. While sociologists of sport have tended to shy away from applied concerns on the one hand, physical educators have tended to view sociological research to be of little consequence or benefit on the other. As a consequence, an enormous gap exists between the interests of researchers and practitioners. Hopefully, the topic discussed today will demonstrate in a small way how sociology of sport can be both relevant and useful to the practitioner. Many of the topics we research have the potential to impact on practical application. All we would need to do to bring this about is to modify some existing beliefs and open avenues of communication. As a cautionary note, however, I should add that sometimes when researchers attempt to discuss findings which may help bridge this gap, misunderstandings may arise. In their attempt to draw relationships between research findings and application, audiences sometimes try to do more with the data than was intended. Therefore, as a caveat, please keep in mind that these are still preliminary data

pertaining to sport retirement. Although I believe these findings offer something of value to the practitioner, this information is more in the form of implication for application. We are a long way from an applied sociology of sport; as yet we do not have the sophistication or inclination to provide "quick fix," patented answers to many of the questions that can be asked.

With this in mind, permit me to outline for you the framework which has preoccupied my research interest for the past three years. Originally, our research was shaped by two underlying assumptions: (1) sport retirement is a termination — perhaps a rather abrupt one, and (2) sport retirement requires considerable psychological adjustment to role withdrawal. Both assumptions rest on the notion that athletes experience difficulties in dealing with sport retirement. Such a notion emanates from case studies and journalistic accounts predominantly associated with leaving professional sport. Yet, the process of leaving sport applies to several thousand individuals -- females as well as males -- who engage in competitive sport within the institutionalized setting of the American educational system. Therefore, it would seem that any difficulties believed to be inherent in the sport retirement process -- that is, "natural" outcomes of leaving sport -- should certainly be evident on this larger and more general population of athletes. Since professional athletes represent less than 2%

of all sport competitors (Eitzen & Sage, 1982), they are not truly representative of the majority of sport participants. Therefore, we felt that sampling a general and larger group would be a better test to determine the extent to which these underlying assumptions really exist. Our study involved over 1,100 former intercollegiate athletes (N = 427 males and 696 females) from the Big Ten Conference. Admittedly, however, the issue of representativeness could still be argued, as patterns obtained for these athletes might not be similar to those for athletes from Divisions II and III. Moreover, any sport retirement study (regardless of competitive level) poses problems of locating representative samples of former athletes.

Popular belief holds that disengagement from a sport role is a traumatic experience, that athletes who leave sport experience deep feelings of loss and disillusionment, identity crisis, or loss of sense of purpose (Ball, 1976; Ogilvie & Howe, 1983). The findings from our study, however, did not reveal such a bleak or negative portrait of the sport retiree. Instead, the data suggested the existence of a considerably different process. More specifically, sport retirement for these athletes seemed not to be disruptive. Rather than an event, retirement appeared to be a transition, reflected by shifting or reprioritizing of interests as well as continued participation in sport. Each of these findings alone may explain why our athletes seemed not to fit the

stereotype or suffer adjustment difficulties. In combination, however, they present some rather interesting implications.

For the most part, we have little information about post-career sport interests and involvement of former athletes. In fact we know little about his/her reasons for participating in sport in the first place. On the one hand we hold stereotypic images of athletes clinging to a role that they may have been forced to relinquish. Yet, ironically, we still tend to believe that sport retirment is a termination of participation, most likely accompanied by total withdrawal from the realm of sport. In our study, however, 75% of the athletes (women as well as men) were still actively participating in sport. Further, more than half followed their former sport regularly or religiously on television or through the mass media. This finding presents some rather interesting points for conjecture regarding the role of sport in the lives of these athletes. Because sport performance seems so oriented toward extrinsic rewards such as trophies, scholarships, fan approval, etc., we might tend to think that these provide the primary attraction for participation. Given evidence from research on motivation (Deci, 1971), a logical hypothesis would posit that once these rewards were removed, participation would also cease (Ryan, 1980). However, it seems that the role of intrinsic factors may be ignored in such thinking. Intrinsic enjoyment

has been recognized as the single most important factor in developing a commitment to sport (Snyder, 1981), and it is possible that the athletes in our study were not motivated solely for extrinsic reasons. Not only would this explain the high rate of post sport career participation, but the high rate itself could also explain why we did not find a pattern of adjustment difficulties to "retirement." Sport was still an important aspect of their lives, and the majority had found a viable transition.

Despite the fact that some of our findings challenge existing notions about sport retirement, some of the data also lend credibility to the image we have of the retiring athlete. Therefore, rather than discard or refute existing ideas, we suggest that perhaps some modification is necessary. This point will be clear when I discuss our data pertaining to "social death" (Greendorfer & Kleiber, 1982). The concept of social death has been used to describe individuals who are biologically or legally alive, yet who may be socially isolated or suffering from ostracism. When applied to sport retirement this notion has been more specifically associated with unconditional release from a team or a downward slide during a sport career (Lerch, 1982; Rosenberg, 1982).

Obviously, this concept is more applicable to the professional athlete; however, we tried to determine whether dimensions of social death were present among the former

athletes in our study. As you'll soon see, this notion of social death was not universal. For example, when asked how they felt or reacted to ending their college sport involvement, we found that the athletes had diverse orientations -- a definite indication that not all shared the same sport experience. In fact their responses fell into several categories, some of which could be considered positive, others as neutral or ambivalent, while still others might be -- not negative -- but perhaps more in line with expectations. These might be classified as indicators of "mild adjustment," since some discomfort or upset was apparent.

Most striking of all was how articulate these athletes were in expressing their feelings. Some indicated a pride in accomplishment while others expressed gratitude. For example, "...happy that I achieved success and was moving on..." might be more reflective of the first category; whereas, "...it was a good learning experience and I was happy to have had the opportunity..." might be more representative of the second. Diversity in reactions was also evident, as some doubted or questioned the value of their sport experience (e.g., "I wouldn't change much, but I question whether the scholarship and fun was worth having a bad knee the rest of my life;" or "I allowed sport from keeping me from rounding out as a person"). Interestingly, the majority of responses fell into two categories: (a) a sense of loss, and (b) regret

or unfinished business. Again, dimensionality and diversity were characteristic. For example, a sense of loss could be reflected as a general feeling (e.g., "I felt that I had lost a valuable possession that I may find again; happy for the memories."); loss or role (e.g., "The biggest adjustment or transition was going from 'glory boy' to just another person"); missing friendships or teammates (e.g., "I knew that I would miss the time being together with my teammates and the success we had as a team"); or missing the activity (e.g., "Sometimes I miss the discipline, friendships, and competition"). In contrast to this sense of loss, feelings of regret or unfinished business often reflected a sense of missed opportunity. For example:

> "I based my total future on being successful in pro sports. After two more knee operations I left myself with only unfulfilled needs."

or "I regret that I didn't work harder in sport and in scholastics."

or "I was somewhat disappointed that I was not given more of an opportunity to prove my ability as an accomplished performer."

These were not the only categories of feelings, however. Relief from the situation and perspective gaining were also apparent. Remarks like "...glad it was over; it freed my life and allowed more privacy..." were not uncommon. By far, remarks reflecting attenuation, ambivalence or perspective gaining were the most evident demonstration of the dimensionality referred to earlier:

"Initially some relief--as time progressed I became aware of how great it was."

"A little disappointed because I had to end it with an injury, but that woke me up as to the realities of the world and I must work outside the sports world."

"I felt lost when eligibility ran out; felt my whole life revolved around basketball....didn't apply my intelligence because basketball was all I cared about....thought I'd be successful at anything just because I enjoyed succes with basketball. But I was wrong. It took me two or three years to readjust and get into the real world...."

This latter reaction conforms more closely to popular beliefs about sport retirement. However, even in this more traumatic case, some attenuation seems to have occurred. Taken in perspective, the reactions expressed by the majority of athletes indicated that leaving sport did not seem to be associated with severe pain or maladjustment (Coakley, 1983). This generalization does not mean that some adjustment wasn't necessary for some athletes, however.

A more in-depth analyses of the data provides reasons which might explain why leaving sport was not disruptive or traumatic for the majority of these athletes. First of all, both the male and female athletes seemed to reprioritize their interests during their college years <u>while</u> they were still competing. Between their freshman and senior year in college, education and social life took on a greater importance, while the importance of sport tended to steadily decline during this same time period. This finding may be a

little surprising because it demonstrates that some dynamic processing of information took place while the athlete was still competing. Whether this was a consciously cognitive process, a deliberate shifting of interests based on some modification or reappraisal of earlier aspirations is not known. However, the early twenties has been identified as the period of "the dream," where occupational goals are set and a preliminary life structure is created for reaching them (Levinson, 1978). It certainly is possible that some reappraisal of goals and dreams took place during the college years for these athletes, particularly if a professional sport career had been anticipated.

What the data also tell us is that the athletes in our study were not narrow in their interests and skills. Although sport was extremely important, it was not to the exclusion of education or social life. This characterization is in direct contrast with that of the retiring athlete who faces a career crisis because s/he must adjust from an all-encompassing life style to a new sense of identity and way of being (Ogilvie & Howe, 1983). Our data do not deny that some athletes experience crisis or trauma. What the data imply is that such a portrayal may be of the athlete who functions as a one-dimensional being in a narrow and limited world, such that self-worth and identity are totally defined in terms of sport. This is not to say that leaving sport doesn't require some adjustment. But then so would any other

change of circumstance or life transition — graduation, marriage, taking on a new job, relocation. The athlete who does not cope well with leaving sport may be one who sacrificed (with more than a little encouragement from significant others) his/her own personal, social, educational or vocational development for sport. Once this all-too-short sport career ends, the athlete has few role skills or resources to draw from and experiences difficulties.

If we consider the realities of interscholastic and intercollegiate sport and the pressures on coaches to win, we can easily understand how the zealous attempt to build a successful athletic program can allow athletic associations and coaches to ignore the "student" or any other potential role dimensions the athlete might possess. The public clamors for a winner and success. Donations and coaching jobs hinge on continued success, and the spiral continues. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand how dreams and aspirations can easily revolve around the promise of potential rewards from sport success. In reality it is not difficult to understand how athletes can be so geared to sport that both education and social life are sacrificed. Under such circumstances the system of sport could foster or explicitly encourage a narrow or limiting orientation which directs all energy and efforts away from the benefits of education or other aspects of life development.

Given this social setting, it should come as no surprise

that athletes learn rather early that it may be acceptable (or even expected) to place less emphasis on the benefits of educational experiences in order to belong to the subculture of sport. In fact, many athletes learn to circumvent the process of education during their school years -- perhaps with the covert support of the academic as well as the athletic system. The result, however, may be potentially disastrous for an athlete who limits his/her definition of self and estimation of self-worth to sport, particularly if alternative role skills have not been developed.

What we are now considering is degree of role commitment and how it affects preparation for and acquisition of alternative role skills. Not only is it possible, but, typically, individuals develop more than one role and more than one skill in any given situation. Consequently, several social roles can be enacted concurrently — individuals usually have at their disposal sufficient resources to do so. (For example, the roles of daughter, teenager, athlete, student, friend, and class president could be held at the same time — without undue risk or ineffective role performance.) Although role conflict is always a potentiality, the point is that multiple role occupancy as well as role preference are normative expectations of daily social life. They are not inherently problematic. Difficulties tend not to arise until individuals are forced to emphasize one role at the expense of others. In the case

of role preference, selection of one role rather than another seems to be prompted by both the social situation, which evokes specific role skills, and identification with or degree of commitment to a particular social role. This notion of commitment or investment blends social and personal factors. Commitment requires a degree of personal investment, which may facilitate or hamper shifts in emphasis or ease of transition between social roles. It is this dynamic that we've been considering.

Applied to the sport retirement process, degree of commitment might influence preparation or reorientation to alternative social or occupational roles, anticipation of leaving sport, or resistence to relinquishing the role of athlete. In this manner commitment or investment could serve as a barometer, indicating the probability that adjustment difficulties to sport retirement might arise.

Difficulty of retiring from an occupational position in later years has been directly associated with the extent to which one's identity and self-concept have been intricately interwoven in the performance of that role (Streib & Schneider, 1971). In terms of the athlete, despite her/his relative youth, research indicates that athletes have been preoccupied with their sport role for several years. Not only have they been involved in sport since an early age (Greendorfer, 1974; Kenyon & McPherson, 1973), but they tend to define themselves from the beginning of their sport

experience almost exclusively in terms of sport (McPherson, 1980). Thus, the development of interests and skills for alternative social and vocational roles can be important.

It is in this domain that implications from our research could have the greatest impact. For example, a coaching staff or athletic association truly interested in the well being of athletes as well as the success of the athletic program might be wise to provide counselling and advising sevices for athletes early in and throughout their athletic careers. I do not mean simply the provision of tutors or study tables; I am referring to career counselling concerned with the development of usable educational and vocational skills geared to the interests and development of athletes. Such counselling would begin when athletes enter college, continue during their competitive years, and not be withdrawn once their eligibility was expended or they suffered injury. Through such a program athletes would be made aware of the dangers of limiting their existence solely to sport or sacrificing development of alternative skills and interests to further their sport career.

Any sport "career" is a very brief one indeed, and odds of achieving such a career are highly unlikely for the majority of amateur athletes. It is the <u>responsibility</u> of coaches and athletic associations to sensitize athletes to this fact of life. Moreover, the athletic association which provides this type of career or reality counselling, in

addition to athletic advising, would not only offer a valuable service to athletes but would also engage in a positive public relations program. Essentially, counselling concerns would not focus on tabulating graduation rates or grade point averages. Rather, attention would be devoted to the development of usable skills which would prepare the athlete to function beyond the realm of sport. It would be a unique athletic program, indeed, which would undertake such a commitment. Such a program would demonstrate to the academic as well as social community that there was sincere interest in playing an active role in post-sport career development of an athlete.

Two implicit notions are really suggested here: (1) the athletic association has a responsibility to its athletes that encompasses more than financial support and benefits which last only as long as the athlete's eligibility, and (2) contrary to current practices and beliefs, it may be possible to achieve athletic excellence without the exclusion of all else. Currently the majority of athletic programs (including athletes themselves) operate under the assumption that an athletic career demands <u>total</u> commitment to insure success. In reality, how exaggerated is this belief? Our data demonstrate that male as well as female athletes engage in some shifting of interests or reprioritization during their college years — without the benefit of any planned counselling. Does this mean an athlete who engages in some

perspective gaining or introspection can not possibly achieve an identical level of excellence in sport than one who limits her/his thoughts totally to sport? Or do such data suggest that despite a commitment toward sport, athletes are multi-dimensional individuals who sometime during their sport career may wonder about their future? The answers to these questions are not imminent, regardless of direction we lean for interpretation. We need much more research on the process of leaving sport, its impact and ultimate consequences before we can begin to address several of the issues raised today. Hopefully, this paper was the first of several steps to bridge the gap between research and practice. Perhaps sometime in the the near future we can take these steps together.

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